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## Blues Beat

### BluesWax Sittin' In With Studebaker John

By Don Wilcock



**Studebaker John**



Release Date: May 1, 2006

Two New Releases  
from Calvin Owens

*Studebaker John* has broken every Blues purist rule in the book. BluesWax's Don Wilcock just had to find out more and recently spoke with John about his rule-breaking career.

"It's a wonder I still have a career," he says with a kind of self-conscious giggle. But does he want to spell out those broken rules?

"Oh, I don't know if I should," says the singer-songwriter/guitarist/harp-player whose tenth album, *Self-Made Man* on the Avanti label, is the #2 "Pick to Click" on Bill Wax's Bluesville channel on XM Satellite Radio, the largest distributed Blues radio program in the world. John's classic 1960 Studebaker Hawk is stalled in his garage because he's too busy with his touring to take care of it. He's got a full schedule that includes a headlining gig at the Northeast Blues Society's Take Me to The River



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VIII on Sunday afternoon August 27, in Troy, New York. Upcoming high-profile dates include Buddy Guy's Legends in Chicago and a two-night stand at the Windsor Hotel in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in early October. He's packing one of the hottest power trios in the Blues with bass player **Bob Halaj**, who's played with **Son Seals**, **Eddie Clearwater**, and the **Chicago Rhythm & Blues Kings**. His drummer, **Willie "The Touch" Hayes**, is splitting his time between John's gigs and sessions for the next **Koko Taylor** album on Alligator. So, with a mere thirty-some years in the business, Studebaker John and **The Hawks** are just starting to heat up.

"Come on," I tell him, if he doesn't list the taboos he's tapped into, I'm going to do it anyway, so what's he got to lose? You can almost hear the gears crunching in his head.

"Well, okay, yeah," he says a little reluctantly. "The number one rule I break is that I write all my own stuff. I refuse to do covers. I've done covers on other peoples' records obviously, but I refuse to do covers on my own. I refuse to play 'Mustang Sally.'"

He's being way too careful. How about the fact that he's cut three CDs (only two have been released) with the remnants of the **Yardbirds** and **The Pretty Things**? These are two British Invasion Rock bands that would give up their Albert Hall box seats to the next set of **Clapton** concerts to have played with Chicago Blues veterans **Hound Dog Taylor** and **J. B. Hutto**, who gave John his communion in Chicago South Side Blues playing.

John shrugs off the pedigree. "I got to hang with them a little bit," he says. "I got to hang with J. B. a little bit more than Hound Dog. Hound Dog had his drinking thing going. There wasn't a whole lot you could get out of him as far as knowledge on playing or anything.

J. B. Hutto was a different story. When I met him, he had diabetes. So, he couldn't drink. He was real straight; really a nice guy. Really a great guy! He wrote some great songs, I thought, and had a great voice and played the style of guitar that I like. His playing was real raw and sometimes he would hit it where it would sound just right, and sometimes it was just a little bit off or whatever. Those moments where he really hit it is the thing that inspired me."

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*"...As I'd hit the strings, the pick would bend.  
So, I started just pulling a coin out of my pocket.  
I started with a penny. It was too small.  
A nickel was too thick. So, I settled on a quarter."*

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John was actually the one who first suggested that the Yardbirds reform



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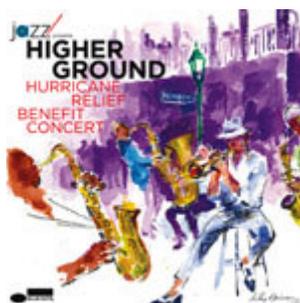


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in 1994. Then he turned down an opportunity to be the next Eric Clapton or **Jimmy Page** when the remaining members offered him a slot in the band.

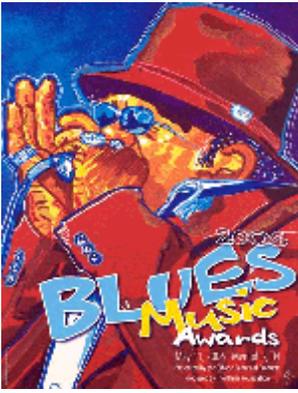
"I actually took **Jim [McCarty, drums/songwriter]** aside, and said, 'Jim, what happened to the Yardbirds? Aren't they touring ever? And he says, 'No, the band has been defunct for years.' And I said, 'Why don't you put it back together?' And he goes, 'Well, Jimmy Page owns the name.' I says, 'Well, I would imagine if you called Page, he wouldn't really care if you used the name again.' So, that's really what happened."

Eventually, the Yardbirds put out a well-received reunion album called *Birdland* in 2003, and have had successful tours, both in Europe and the States. But if you can find them, there are two CDs that Studebaker John cut with the Yardbirds and The Pretty Things more than a decade ago: *Wine, Women and Whiskey* on Demon Records in England and another called *1991 Chicago Blues Tapes* on the St. George label. A third, which he claims is the best of the three, was never released. Last year, John and his Hawks played the Maryport and Stanley Blues Fests in England opening for the Yardbirds.

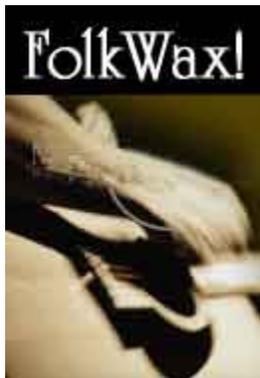
Instead of putting his nose in the air about British Blues artists having to learn their craft from records while he was skipping grade school to see **Magic Sam** in person, John tips his trademark hat to his English friends. "I thought they were up to speed because they studied so hard. And, don't forget, around that time in the 1960s, the [Chicago] guys were actually touring overseas. **Muddy** toured. **Big Walter** toured over there. Hound Dog Taylor toured. In fact, Hound Dog Taylor backed up **Little Walter** on a tour along with Koko Taylor. There are documented films of these guys touring."

Talk about politically incorrect, Studebaker John whose last name is Grimaldi, is the son of an Italian plumber who expected his son to follow him in the family business. "Going on the South Side to play with a bunch of black musicians was not the idea my father had in store for me. In fact, I was constantly asked if I was on drugs or something," says the man who remembers that first Sunday morning he discovered another of his mentors, **Big John Wrencher**, performing on Chicago's Maxwell Street, a kind of flea market hangout for Chicago Blues artists. John wasn't even in high school, let alone old enough to catch these acts in nightclubs, but he remembers it as if it were yesterday.

"Every corner had a guy with a trench coat on and he'd open up his coat and show you thousands of watches all hanging off him like a tree, rolled up his sleeve were all kinds of chains, just jewelry and stuff. You'd go from table to table looking at whatever used or stolen merchandise. Who knew? Turn the corner and there was a crowd of people around what I heard was music. I thought at first, 'Oh, that sounds pretty interesting. Wonder what that is?' There was a crowd of maybe 10 to 15 people standing around. I could only see the backs of their heads. So, I moved up. It got louder and louder, and I got right up in front of the band, and



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there's John Wrencher, and he's playin' harp and singin' into the same mike, and there's this guitar player. It was a real raw type of guitar player like a Magic Sam or **Daddy Rabbit**, who was a big influence on me. So, it was these three guys, and the drummer had half of a real drum kit and the other half was toy drums. It was real raw, but great harmonica sound. Great sound. They just played.

"The guitar played a complementary line, almost like a bass run to whatever was going on with the harp. He taught me a lot on harp just by watching him because he only had one arm, and so he did this stuff that I was thinking, 'You're doing that with your hands?'"

"He was only cupping the harp and holding the mike with one hand, but he was getting these sounds that were like tremolo and kind of like what I call a 'wobble,' which most guys you would see would be shaking their head or shaking their harp back and forth across the mouth. He was getting that without doing any of that, and he and **James Cotton** were how I first started figuring out that it was tongue-blocking and octaves and stuff that they were doing that started me trying stuff like that."

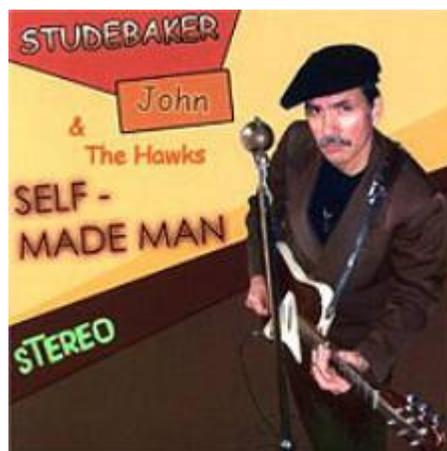
John's first instrument was the drums he played with a **Ventures**-style band in the 1960s. When the band wasn't rehearsing in his basement, he'd go down and pick on the Silvertone Dan Electro guitars. "As I was playing the guitar, the pick would just snap in half or just didn't feel right because they were so flimsy. As I'd hit the strings, the pick would bend. So, I started just pulling a coin out of my pocket. I started with a penny. It was too small. A nickel was too thick. So, I settled on a quarter."

John didn't know it at the time, but he was taking a page out of the Country music songbook. "If you listen to Country guys who use those flat finger-picks that are metal, they do get a real biting, high, edgy kind of sound. It's possibly true that I do get a sound that way."

Today, John uses old silver-content quarters to put an edge on his boogie guitar. "I like the old ones because they're made out of silver or something, and I can grip that better. Some of the newer ones are made out of nickel or something like that. They're a little slicker, and really that's the only reason why. It doesn't really have anything to with a conscious effort of a sound from these particular things. It did help my sound. I can say that."

*Self-Made Man* contains 15 songs and runs almost 80 minutes, another "rule" that runs contrary to the advice his former labels Blind Pig and Evidence gave him to keep it to 45 minutes or people would get bored. By the time they got around to giving him advice, he was already firmly entrenched in the rebels' camp. When his young friends told him that **Paul Butterfield** put Blues harp into Rock 'n' Roll and that it wasn't right, John argued that Butter had a great harmonica sound and great tone. So what if it sounded like Rock 'n' Roll? And when **Dylan** hit the scene everyone said it was his words, not the music. "I couldn't understand what the guy was saying. I'd say, 'I like the music.' [They'd

say] 'The music? What, are you crazy? Everybody just listens to the words.'"



Studebaker John & The Hawks' *Self-Made Man*  
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Studebaker John likes one-armed Johnny Wrencher and he likes **The Beatles**. He listens to **Nirvana** and he thinks, had he lived, Magic Sam would have been bigger than **Jimi Hendrix**. John plays raw, Blues boogie with Country flat picks. He can sing through a harp microphone with a voice that sounds like an alien speaking through a Burger King drive-thru intercom on a humid day, or he can glide through a song like "Ride, Ride, Ride" with slick abandon. Although he's no Blues purist, you can find plenty of his originals that appeal to those who cling to the ideals of the real deal.

"I can hear stuff that makes my music contemporary, but I can hear the roots of it in the purist stuff and the rawness of it in the purist stuff. One good thing about it is that I never lose that kind of aggressive feel it takes to play that kind of raw stuff."

*Don Wilcock is a contributing editor at BluesWax. You may contact Don at blueswax@visnat.com.*

## Real Sounds From the Work Place

The following are the Top Five most often listened-to recordings in the *BluesWax* offices this week, August 17, 2006 (in no particular order):

1. **Ike Turner** - *Risin' with the Blues* (Zojo Music) Release: September 14
2. **Mitch Kashmar** - *Wake Up & Wo* (Delta Groove) Release: September 19
3. **Midnight Shift** - *Bullet Proof* (self-produced)
4. **Lil' Dave Thompson** - *Got To Get Over You* (Electro-Fi Record)
5. **Daddy Mack Blues Band** - *Slow Ride* (Inside Sounds)



## This Week in *BluesWax*:

### Sugarcane Collins

- **In the E-zine:** *BluesWax* is Sittin' In With Sugarcane Collins. While you may not have heard of Collins yet, you will! James Walker sat down with this Australian Bluesman and learned a lot more about where his Blues come from.
- **On the News Page:** Kristen Berglund Passes; Jimmy "The Midnight Cowboy" Pryor Moves On; *Bluesville* Picks To Click; New XM Radio Show To Feature Blues Societies; Bob Dylan Records Guest Piano Track; Alan Lomax Special on PBS; Bob Corritore's Birthday Blues Bash; Mark Hummel News; Deanna Bogart and Duke Tomatoe Return To Blind Pig; and much more News That's Blues!
- **On the Photo Page:** Mojo Buford Live courtesy of Joe Rosen and [www.josepharosen.com](http://www.josepharosen.com).
- **On the Blues Bytes page:** *BluesWax* is Sittin' In With George "Mojo" Buford. Bob Margolin sat down with Mojo Buford, an old friend, recently to discuss the past, present, and future of this true Blues legend. Be sure to check out the world's best Blues comic strip, *Buddy and Hopkins!*
- **On the Blues Beat page:** *BluesWax* is Sittin' In With Studebaker John. Don Wilcock sat down with Studebaker John recently to discuss his Blues and his latest CD, *Self-Made Man*.
- **Under BluesWax Picks:** Dylann DeAnna reviews the Beat Daddys' *5 Moons* and the various artist compilation *2005 Lucerne Blues Festival*; Arthur Wood reviews Ray Wylie Hubbard's *Snake Farm*; plus reviews of John Mooney's *Big Ol' Fiya*, Michael Packer's *Sweet Rhythm*, and the various artists compilation *When The Sun Goes Down: Sacred Roots of the Blues*.
- **One Year Ago Today In BluesWax:** *BluesWax* was "Sittin' In With Nick Moss." Bob Margolin sat down with Chicago Bluesman Nick Moss and his wife and business partner Kate to discuss business, recording, and much more.
- **Don't forget to play the Blues Trivia Game:** Remember,

everyone who plays is in the drawing for the prize! This week's prize: a two-CD pack that includes the Kelly Bell Band's *Phat Blues Music*, courtesy of Kelly Bell, and Michael "Hawkeye" Herman's *It's All blues To Me*, courtesy of Hawkeye Herman. Play Today!

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